



NACTS

Assessing the Suitability of Candidates for Priesthood: Best Practices for Bishops, Rectors, Formation Teams, and Seminary Mental Health Professionals - Practical Considerations

Presentation to the National Association of Catholic Theological Schools

October 3, 2025

Timothy Lock, Ph.D.

Goretti Center for Healing & Forgiveness

www.goretticenter.com



Psychological Services for Adults & Children

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Welcome!

Goretti Center for Healing & Forgiveness Psychological Services specializes in clinical assessment and psychotherapy from a Catholic perspective, focusing both on root causes as well as symptom reduction, and working with patients to access, understand, and treat the underlying sources of many psychological symptoms and challenges. Thank you for taking a moment to learn about our approach, services, and other information.



Dr. Lock's shameless plug as a member of the Board of Directors of Courage: You are invited to schedule a "seminarian study day" (for your seminary) or a "clergy study day" (for your diocesan priests and/or deacons) focusing on authentic Catholic ministry to folks with same-sex attractions and/or transgender issues. Contact the Courage office to arrange a study day.

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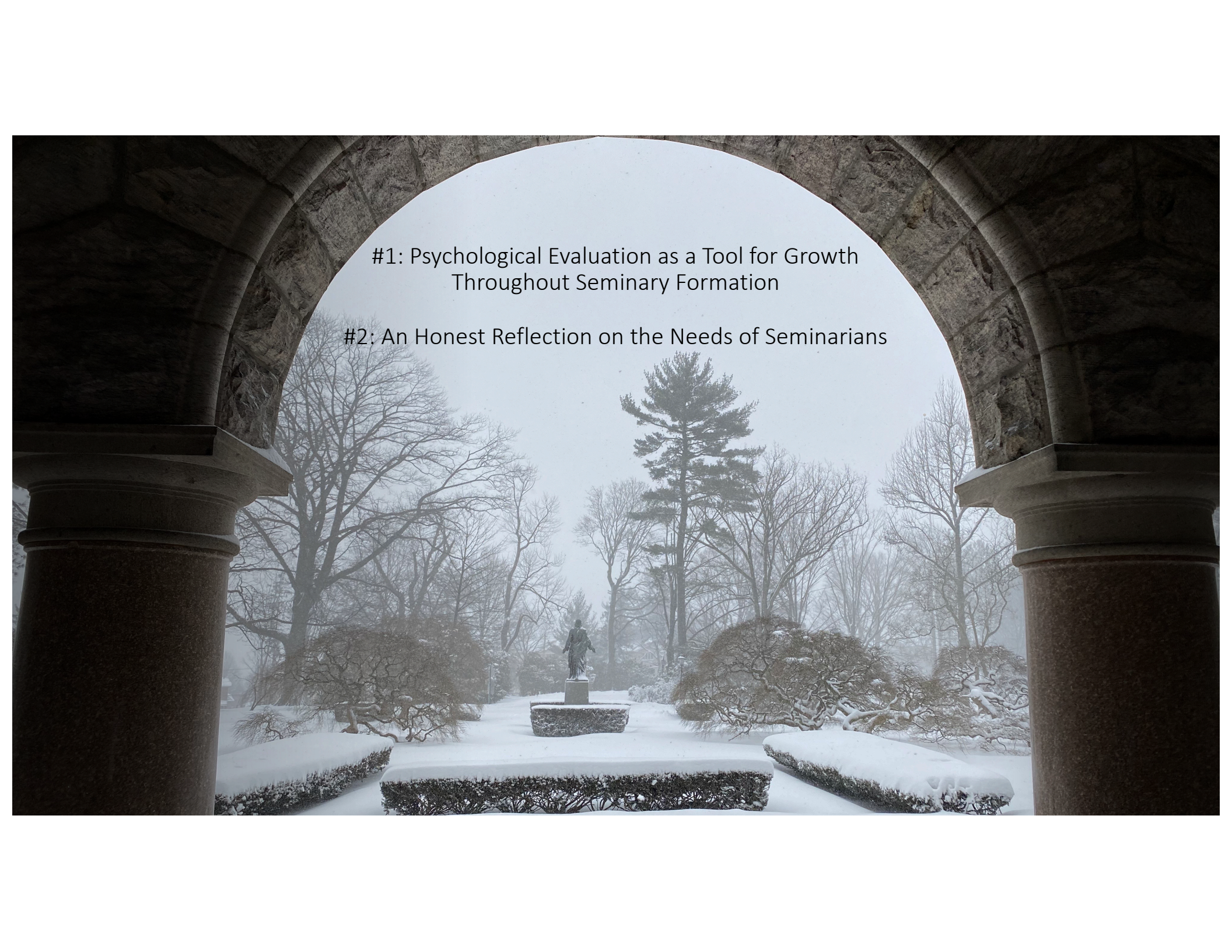
Participant Resources

Apply Now

EQUIPPING PRIESTLY FORMATORS

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#1: Psychological Evaluation as a Tool for Growth
Throughout Seminary Formation

#2: An Honest Reflection on the Needs of Seminarians

Psychological Evaluation as a Tool for Growth Throughout Seminary Formation

The Path of a Psychological Evaluation

The “Personal Plan for Priestly
Formation”



The Path of a Psychological Evaluation





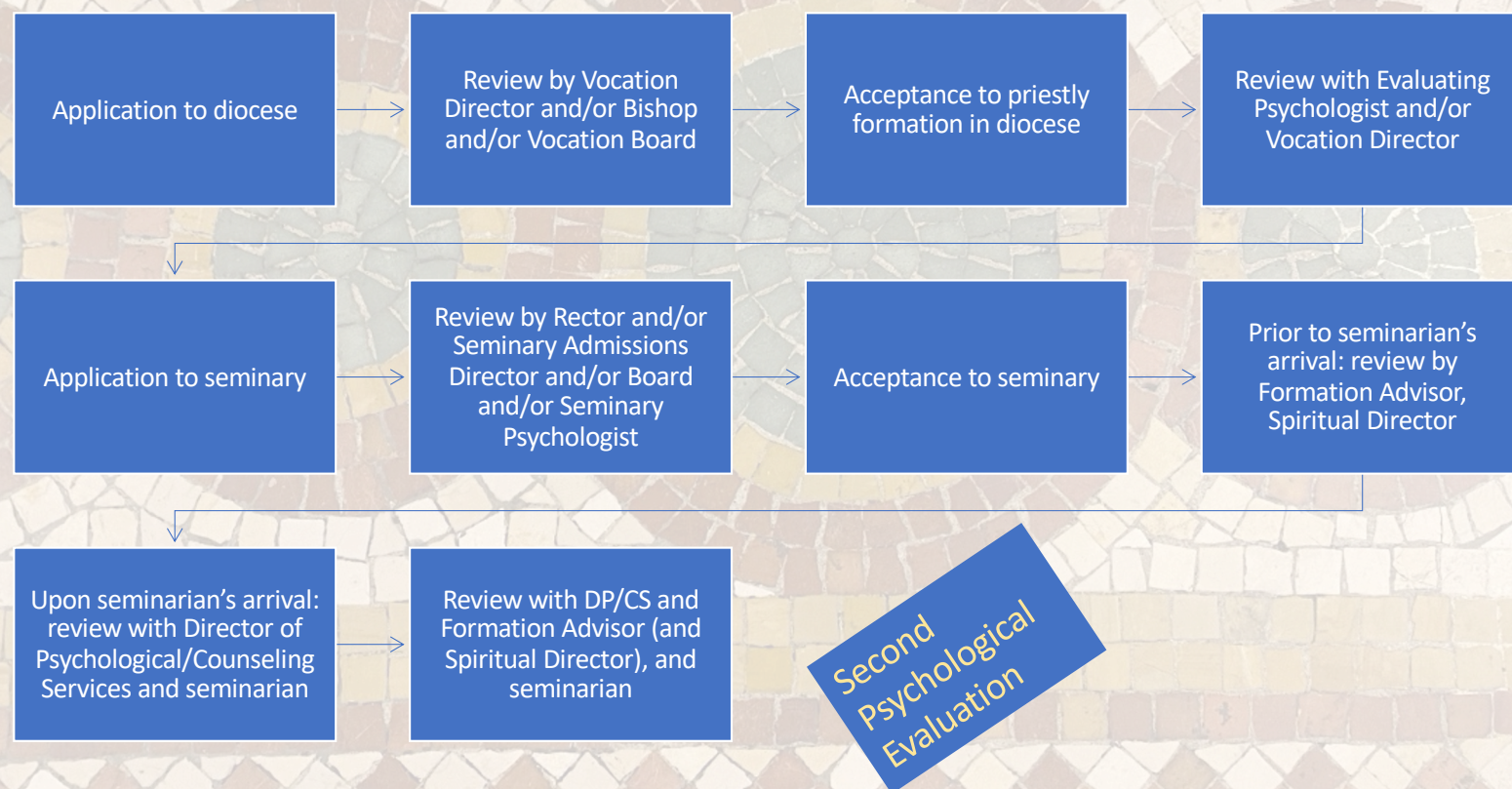
CONSENSUS:

Notre Dame's [McGrath Institute for Church Life](#) will be publishing a white paper summarizing the work of CARA and the McGrath National Consultation that took place in early September 2025.

If you would like to receive an email alerting you that this paper has been released, you can email me and I'll make sure you get the link when it comes out:

doctortimlock@gmail.com

The Path of a Psychological Evaluation



The Path of a Psycho

Application to diocese

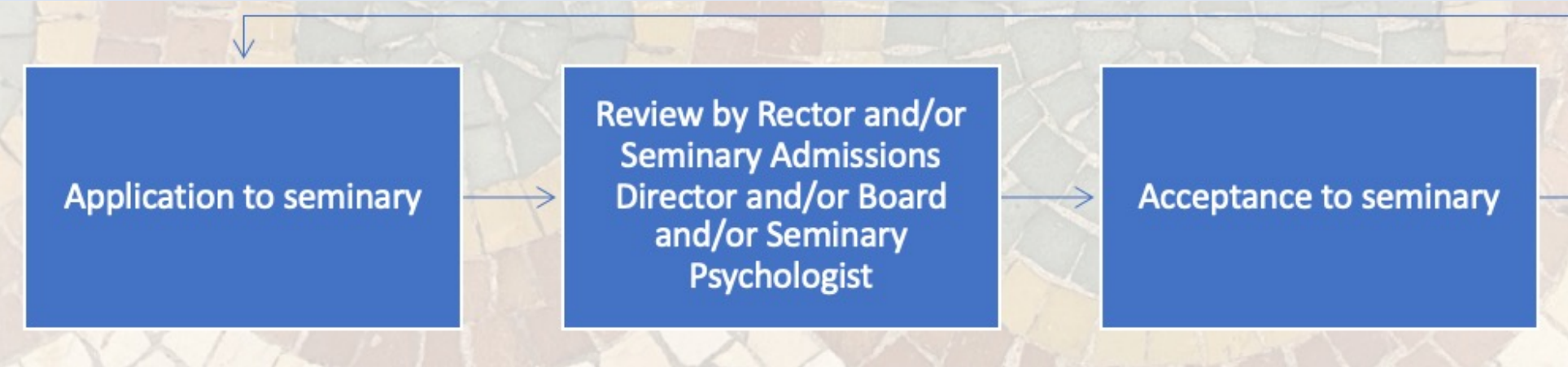


Review by Vocation
Director and/or Bishop
and/or Vocation Board

logical Evaluation

→ Acceptance to priestly
formation in diocese

→ Review with Evaluating
Psychologist and/or
Vocation Director



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graph LR; A[Application to seminary] --> B[Review by Rector and/or Seminary Admissions Director and/or Board and/or Seminary Psychologist]; B --> C[Acceptance to seminary];
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Application to seminary

Review by Rector and/or
Seminary Admissions
Director and/or Board
and/or Seminary
Psychologist

Acceptance to seminary

The “Personal Plan for Priestly Formation”

“A psychological assessment is an integral part of the admission procedure.” “At the same time, the applicant should understand that the testing results will be shared with the diocesan bishop, the vocation director, the rector, and his agent in a way that permits a thorough review. **At times formators may need to work with the seminarian on matters related to the evaluation, and thus they will need some knowledge of the assessment.**” “In the event that further consultation is needed in a particular case, additional release forms must be obtained.” (PPF-VI, #70, emphasis added)



Prior to seminarian's
arrival: review by
Formation Advisor,
Spiritual Director

The “Personal Plan for Priestly Formation”

“Once an applicant is admitted to the propaedeutic stage, the **application process contributes to the seminarian’s personal plan for priestly formation**. Specifically, the observations and conclusions that emerge from the admissions process serve as a significant resource for the seminarian’s human, spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral formation. The sharing of this information presumes a due respect for the rights of the seminarian and a strict maintenance of confidentiality. A written consent, signed by the seminarian, is required before any confidential information can be shared.” (PPF-VI, #57)

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graph LR; A[Upon seminarian's arrival: review with Director of Psychological/Counseling Services and seminarian] --> B[Review with DP/CS and Formation Advisor (and Spiritual Director), and seminarian]
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Upon seminarian's arrival:
review with Director of
Psychological/Counseling
Services and seminarian

Review with DP/CS and
Formation Advisor (and
Spiritual Director), and
seminarian

**If there is a second evaluation, these two steps should take place with the second evaluation.

The “Personal Plan for Priestly Formation”



Seminarian Joe O'Hallahan
Feedback and Formation Goals extracted
from Psychological Evaluation
Edited by Dr. Timothy Lock
11/20/22

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timlock@dunwoodie.edu
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Strengths identified in psychological evaluation:

- | | |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Cooperative• Open, candid and sincere• Trustworthy and trusts others• Values being helpful to others | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Has been able to overcome sinful habits• Sympathetic to those in need• Dependable• Optimistic about his life and experience |
|---|--|

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Goal 1	Seminarian response	Plans to achieve goal	Follow-up
To increase ability to integrate emotional life. To grow in ability to be introspective, to be aware of his emotions, and to process his emotional reactions.	Agreed. Joe shared that he has been working on this, but he said, “I think the integration confuses me sometimes.” He also reported, “My tendency with negative emotions is to ignore it and put it away.”		
Goal 2			
To explore his feelings of fear and tenseness, worry, embarrassment (testing suggests he embarrasses easily), as well as his feelings of insecurity and low self-confidence. Testing suggests addressing issue that, “he is likely to be easily hurt by criticism”.	Agreed. Joe said, “It’s a family flaw - we’re easily hurt by criticism.” He also said, “I do embarrass easily.”		

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Goal 3	Seminarian response	Plans to achieve goal	Follow-up
To learn conflict management skills. To face emotionally complicated situations and to avoid inclination to avoid conflict and be highly compliant.	Agreed. "Yeah, that is a problem. If there is any way that I can avoid conflict, I usually take that route." He said that he will avoid topics that may get others angry and is not very good at managing situations when people do get angry.		

The “Personal Plan for Priestly Formation”



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Goal 6	Seminarian response	Plans to achieve goal	Follow-up
To learn leadership skills by assuming positions of leadership in seminary. He should be encouraged to plan some activity that includes a “due date”, and to attend to the details of the planning. He should receive input from those he is leading but ultimately, he should be the one to make the decisions for the group.	Agreed. “It’s not wrong”, Joe said. He added, “The due date really got me” because it was so accurate. He said, “This needs to happen but I’m going to dread it so much. I am feeling dread looking at that statement.”		

An Honest Reflection on the Needs of Seminarians

Adequate Resources: The Need

Real vs Ideal: The Problem of Unchastity

Adequate Resources: Practical Examples



Adequate resources: The Need

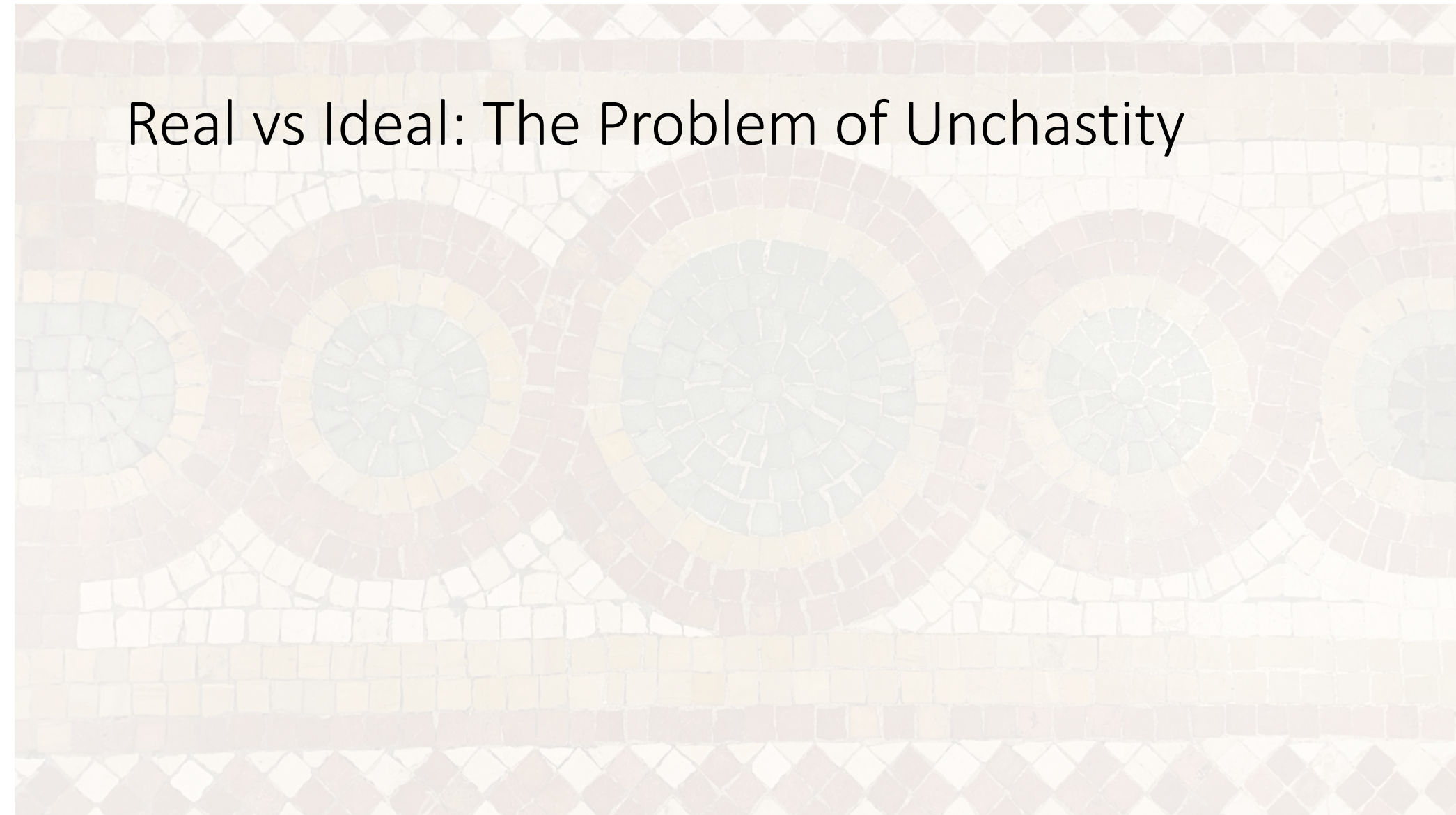
“Applicants from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds should be given every encouragement. An effort must be made by vocation directors and seminaries to honor every vocational stirring. Propaedeutic programs and seminaries are **responsible for ensuring the possession of adequate resources to serve the formative needs of such applicants**. Formation requirements should not be lessened, but necessary adaptations may be made to enable admission into the regular course of study. Applicants must have an adequate command of the English language...” (PPF-VI, #68, emphasis added)

Adequate resources: The Need

If we are going to accept a seminarian with a particular need, the seminary is responsible to ensure that the seminarian is offered adequate resources.

EXAMPLE: the blind seminarian.

Real vs Ideal: The Problem of Unchastity



Assessment of their seminary formation

“I feel that if we were honest with problems we were facing, especially concerning chastity, we would have been kicked out. There was no place to address issues with pornography and masturbation, although many of us greatly desired to be able to talk about it. We felt we would have been removed from formation.”

Real vs Ideal: The Problem of Unchastity

“Concerning the capacity to live the charism of celibacy, the applicant should give evidence of having lived in continence for a sustained period of time, which would be for at least two years before entering a priestly formation program.” (PPF-FIVE, 54)

“Concerning the capacity to live the charism of celibacy, the applicant is to have lived in continence for a sustained period of time before entering the propaedeutic stage of priestly formation, so that he may give a strong indication to the vocation director and formators of his capacity for continence and self-possession. In discerning the minimal length of this sustained period of time, indicators in the applicant himself—such as age, life experiences, and capacity for growth in psychosexual maturity—should be considered by admissions personnel.” (PPF-SIX, 72)

Real vs Ideal: The Problem of Unchastity

*“The annual evaluation should include a well-founded judgment concerning the suitability of the seminarian for advancement to the next year or stage of formation. The evaluation report should be detailed. The qualities listed in Canon Law for promotion to Holy Orders are considered at each stage of advancement: integral faith, right intention, requisite knowledge, good reputation, integral morals and proven virtues, and the requisite physical and psychological health. **The evaluation should provide a judgment of the seminarian’s aptitude for priestly life and ministry as well as an estimation of his capacity to lead a chaste, celibate life.**” (PPF-VI, 171)*

Real vs. Ideal

In one unnamed seminary, the men in first configuration were anonymously surveyed and asked how long they have been able to live continence (i.e., without sexual indulgence, such as pornography, and without sexual activity, such as masturbation).

73% of the men in first configuration said they were able to maintain continence for 3 months or less.

27% of the men in first configuration said they were able to maintain continence for one year or more

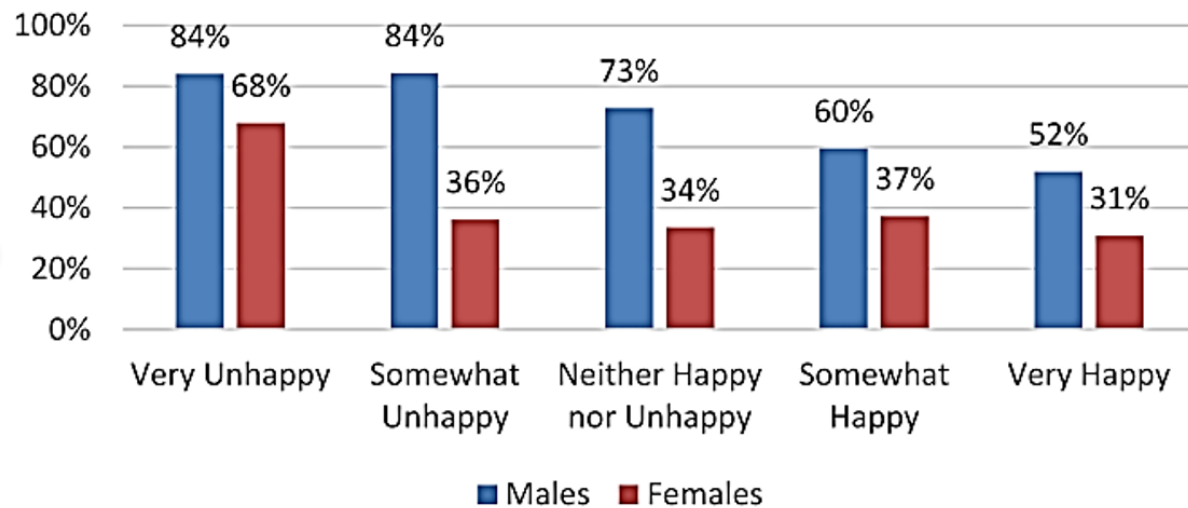
Self-abuse in Private: What's the Big Deal?

- Freedom is impacted
- Cognitive dissonance impacts ministry
- Can cause hopelessness: desire for freedom but not achieved
- 2020 research study again showed self-abuse decreases happiness
- “It is a miserable existence to live a double life.”
- Relationships negatively impacted (way he looks at women)
- Could impact the house (caught by another seminarian, way he talks about women, immaturity)
- Risk of escalation: such as sexually explicit texting
- Risk of boundary violations
- Within context of support of seminary, may be ok, but what about 5 years into priesthood when your mom dies, etc.

Frequency of Masturbation Within Past Week by Self-reported Happiness

M. Regnerus and D. Gordon
*Social, Emotional and Relational Distinctions in Patterns
of Recent Masturbation Among Young Adults*

The Austin Institute for the Study of Family and Culture, 2014



Adequate resources: Practical Considerations

If we are going to accept a seminarian with particular needs, the seminary is responsible to ensure that they offer adequate resources.

Adequate resources: Practical Considerations

*“Psychological counseling: **On occasion**, consultation with a psychologist or other licensed mental health professional can be a useful instrument of human formation. Some patterns of behavior, for example, which became set in the seminarian’s early family history, may impede his relational abilities. Understanding one’s psychological history and developing strategies to address elements of negative impact can be very helpful in human formation. **This kind of counseling or consultation is distinguished from extensive psychotherapy, which may be needed to address deeply entrenched personal issues that impede full functioning of the person. The seminarian already completed psychological testing as part of the application process. At that time, if extensive and in-depth therapy was necessary, it took place outside of the seminary context prior to the decision concerning admission.** It can also be the case that the necessity for such extensive therapy emerges after admission. In the latter case the seminarian is to withdraw from the program and pursue the therapy before being considered for readmission to the seminary and resuming his advancement to Holy Orders.” (PPF-VI, 188e)*

Adequate resources: Practical Considerations

- Individual Psychotherapy
- Group Psychotherapy
 - Process Groups
 - [The Augustine Way](#) Groups
 - “Heart of the Pure Man Group”
 - [Living Waters: Restoring Relational Integrity Through the Broken Body of Christ](#) www.desertstream.org
- Self-help Group
 - “St. Joseph’s Groups”
 - [Sexaholics Anonymous](#) (aka “SA”) (meetings in person and online)
- Intensive Treatment
 - [My House Workshop](#)
 - [Bethesda Workshops](#)
- Residential Treatment
 - [Ender’s Island](#)
 - [Shalom Center](#)
 - [Guest House](#)
 - [Religious Sisters of Mercy](#) (RSMs / “Alma Sisters”)
- Resource for Formator
 - [Kenrick book written for SSA but can easily be applied to heterosexual men struggling with compulsive sexual behavior](#)

DISCLAIMER: Many of these resources I have used with clients; others I offer because these are used by people I trust. I am not endorsing these over other options, simply providing some options that come to mind. Also, I receive no “kickback” for listing these resources.

Where can a Rector look if he wants his own psychotherapists or if he wants to meet with a therapist?

<https://www.holyalliancesupport.org/> (an organization for bishops but the psychotherapists on the website are vetted practicing Catholics who are trusted by bishops – click [here](#) to see the list of therapists.

<http://www.catholicpsychotherapy.org/> (click [here](#) to “find a therapist”)

<http://www.catholictherapists.com/> (click [here](#) to “find a therapist”)

SUPPORT GROUP – CATHOLIC PRIESTS:

SASACERDOTES@GMAIL.COM

Email Fr. Sean Kilcawley and ask to join the Catholic priests SA Group.



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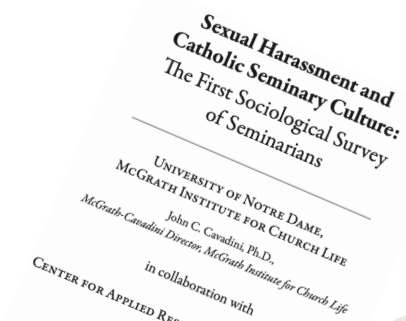
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STAY TUNED FOR THE NEXT DEVELOPMENT FROM McGRATH:

In 2018:



In 2023:



In 2026:

**Best Practices & Practical Considerations
in the Church's Assessing the Suitability
of Candidates for Holy Orders
(actual title is still under construction!)**

University of Notre Dame,
McGrath Institute for Church Life

Fr. Thomas Berg, Ph.D.
Timothy G. Lock, Ph.D.

in collaboration with

CARA
Principal Investigators:
Jonathon Wiggins, Ph.D.

Mary, Mother of Priests, pray for us!

